

Cartledge, Liz.

THE LABRADOR AS GUIDE DOG FOR THE
BLIND.

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HOUSE FOR THE BLIND**

THE WORM TURNS.

from the gaols. They even, on one occasion, raided the Citadel in Great Portland Street itself, though they contented themselves with raiding the canteen and pinching all the cane tips (especially the rounded ones - so useful for country work!)

Petronella collected her wits and her scattered bricks. It was no use wandering around in a daze with so many parshies about. But alas! Her previous misdemeanour had not gone overlooked after all. She saw the dreaded black uniforms of the parshies approaching. She turned to run, but her ball and chain caught on a loose paving slab. She fell, and all went dark about her "Wake up! Wake up! It's only a dream!" Half paralysed with terror Petronella sat up in bed, and clutched at her long-suffering husband. "Goodness! You were screaming loud enough to wake the dead! You always get nightmares when you've been to the Federation. Why on earth do you go? You know they always frighten you to death."

"But darling, they need me. If I didn't go there'd be no-one to read the letters, and give them lifts and things."

"Well let them read their own blasted letters! They're always on about that Optacon thing! And what about all that mobility they're so fond of boasting about? I'm sure they don't really need you." Petronella gave a contented sigh and settled down to sleep again. "And if they complain," added her husband, "Refuse to sign their bloody bus passes!"

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THE LABRADOR AS GUIDE DOG FOR THE BLIND by Liz Cartledge.

(Reprinted from THE COMPLETE ILLUSTRATED LABRADOR - edited by Joe and Liz Cartledge, published by Ebury Press, London, 1974, price £2.50)

Until the early 50's it was unusual to see a Labrador Retriever in the role of guide dog, largely because the German Shepherd (Alsatian) was the dog considered most suitable for the purpose. In fact, during that period the Alsatian was the breed considered most suitable for any kind of training. However, as the demand for guide dogs grew, it became increasingly difficult to obtain sufficient Alsations of the correct temperament, particularly since more and more of that breed were being used by the police and security firms. Also, at this time a great number of blind people were taking up employment in industry and commerce and required a more socially acceptable dog, which they could take to their place of work. Over the years since the 50's the Labrador has proved to be the most adaptable breed and has shown many good qualities needed in a dog for a blind person to deal with. Friendly by nature, he has a steady walking pace and is less affected than other breeds by the noisy conditions found in large cities, factories and offices. The Labrador has the right body sensitivity for acceptance of harness, and is not unduly affected by a person who may have a slightly uneven walking gait. He is suitable for a much wider range of people than is the Alsatian, making the matching up of dog and handler much easier. The breed also has far less of the chasing instinct found in other types.

The Labradors' only disadvantage for guide dog training is its insatiable appetite. Although all blind who have guide dogs are advised on the correct feeding for the animal, there is little doubt that the appealing expression of

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the Labrador directed at other members of the family and the general public results in people being easily persuaded to give the guide dog illicit tit-bits, thinking this is a reward for the great and tireless duty they perform.

'Braille made the blind man literate the guide dog made him mobile.' Over the past 40 years hundreds of blind people have achieved mobility and much independence with the aid of a guide dog, and there is no adequate way fully to explain the great work these dogs perform.

Equally praiseworthy is the devoted work done in training the dogs in the centres at Bolton, Exeter, Forfar, Leamington Spa and, soon Wokingham. The training of a guide dog takes about five months. In recent years a breeding and puppy walking centre has also been established, so that the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association can breed its own puppies and provide a regular supply of dogs for the training centres. (The Association is of course the registered charitable organisation which trains the guide dogs and blind persons in their use; it is entirely dependent on the public for financial support).

About 85 per cent of the dogs used in Britain are Labradors, either black or yellow. But it must be said that good service is also obtained from the Alsations, the golden retrievers and occasionally the border collies and the boxers which are used. Certain crosses of all these breeds are also acceptable, provided they meet the physical and temperamental requirements. About 90 per cent of the animals used are bitches, as it is found they are less dominant than the males and less easily distracted by other dogs. The Association now obtains most of its stock from the breeding and puppy kennels at Tollgate House near Warwick, and at present about 65 per cent of the guide dogs in training have been bred and reared under these arrangements. Puppies are also purchased from reputable breeders, or accepted as gifts, providing they have the right physique and temperament. Adult bitches from the age of 12 to 30 months are also acceptable among the breeds mentioned. These dogs are taken on approval for a period of three weeks and returned to the owners if unsuitable. In the case of puppies, when they are between six and eight weeks old - that is, if they are so far suitable for the job - they are boarded out in homes and with families living within reasonable distance of the training centres. The family must live in a built-up area, and the puppies should be brought up with children, other household pets, tradesmen and all the noise of urban life. The puppies stay with the 'walkers,' as they are called, for about eight months, until they are around 10 or 12 months old. The walker must get the puppy used to traffic, going in and out of shops, travelling by public transport, meeting the clatter of trains, in fact, to all the noise and commotion of daily life.

From then on the training of the guide dog lies with the experts, and all through the training period there may be rejections, for over-suspiciousness, too high or too low a degree of body sensitivity, over possessiveness or bad and unsound temperament. Cat chasers are definitely excluded! However, thanks to selective breeding, the fall-out rate has decreased considerably over the last few years, and it is hoped that it will drop even further as time goes on and experience is gained.

The Labrador is a magnificent dog in this service for hundreds of blind people, which gives a new outlook and new freedom to those who have all their lives been dependent on other human beings for their every move outside the little circle of their home.

(This article was written by Liz Cartledge from information given by Mr. A.J. Phillipson, Director of Training - now retired - and Mr. Derek Freeman, Breeding and Puppy Walking Manager, both of the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association).

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